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SUBJECT: TROUBLED TUNISTIA: WHAT SHOULD WE DO?
Classified By: Ambassador Robert F. Godec for E.O. 12958 reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

Summary

1. (S/NF) By many measures, Tunisia should be a close US ally. But it is not. While we share some key values and the country has a strong record of democracy, Tunisia is not a democracy. It is a police state, with little freedom of expression, and a belief in the American culture of innovation. Tunisians see these as important for their future.
2. (S/NF) In the past three years, US Mission Tunis has responded by offering greater cooperation where the Tunisians say they want it, but not where they do not.

The Backdrop: Historic Relations and Shared Values

3. (SBU) The United States and Tunisia have 200 years of close ties and common interests, including advancing regional peace, combating terrorism, and promoting economic growth.
4. (SBU) On foreign policy, Tunisia has long played a moderate role (although recently its goal has been to "get along with everyone"). The Godec has been a strong advocate of this approach.
5. (SBU) Finally, although Tunisians have been deeply angry over the war in Iraq and perceived US bias towards Israel, most still admire the US and its values.

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scientific exchanges, and a belief in the American culture of innovation. Tunisians see these as important for their future.

The Problem: A Sclerotic Regime and Growing Corruption

6. (C) Despite Tunisia's economic and social progress, its record on political freedoms is poor. Tunisia is a police state, with little freedom of expression, and a belief in the American culture of innovation. Tunisians see these as important for their future.
7. (C) The problem is clear: Tunisia has been ruled by the same president for 22 years. He has no successor. And, while President Ben Ali deserves credit for his economic and social progress, his record on political freedoms is poor.

US-Tunisian Relations: If Only We Would Say This Is Paradise

8. (S/NF) US-Tunisian relations reflect the realities of the Ben Ali regime. On the positive side, we have accomplished several goals in recent years, including advancing regional peace, combating terrorism, and promoting economic growth.
9. (C) But we have also had too many failures. The GOT frequently declines to engage, and there have been too many lost opportunities. The GOT's most troubling has been the GOT's unilateral and clumsy effort to impose new and retroactive taxes on the American Cooperative School of Tunis.
10. (C) At the same time, the GOT has also increasingly tightened controls that make it exceptionally difficult for the US Mission to conduct its work.
11. (C) Beyond the stifling bureaucratic controls, the GOT makes it difficult for the Mission to maintain contact with a Tunisian who is not a member of the GOT.
12. (C) Some of the GOT's actions may be related to its intense dislike of the former Administration's "freedom agenda." The GOT considered this a threat to its power.

So, What Should We Do?

13. (C) Notwithstanding the frustrations of doing business here, we cannot write off Tunisia. We have too much at stake. We have an interest in Tunisia's success, and we have a responsibility to help it achieve its potential.

The Extended Hand

14. (C) Since President Obama's inauguration, Tunisians have been more receptive to the United States. Senior GOT officials have warmly welcomed our presence, and we have been able to engage them on a number of issues.

How To Advance Democracy and Human Rights

15. (S) The Obama Administration creates an important opportunity, then, to explore whether and how to pursue a more productive bilateral relationship with Tunisia.
16. (C) We should consider how this policy objective is publicly manifested, however. For several years, the United States has been out in front of the world in its support for democracy and human rights.
17. (C) In addition, we should increase our efforts to persuade our European partners, and other like-minded countries, to step up their efforts to promote democracy and human rights in Tunisia.

Advancing Other US Interests

18. (C) Whether we succeed on democracy and human rights, the United States has an interest in building relations with a wide spectrum of Tunisians, including those who are not members of the GOT.
19. (C) In addition, we should offer serious engagement in high-priority areas for Tunisians that will also benefit the United States, including -- more, and more comprehensive, English-language programs; -- Ph.D. scholarships for Tunisian students to study in the United States, such as in the field of international law; and -- support for the development of a free press.
20. (C) In addition to talking to the GOT, we need to engage directly with the Tunisian people, especially youth. The Embassy is already using a variety of methods to do this, including the use of social media and the establishment of a youth center.

Advancing Broader Foreign Policy Objectives And Security Cooperation

21. (C) We should also seek new ways to engage Tunisia in pursuit of our broader foreign policy agenda. We believe that the GOT would welcome our assistance in this regard.
22. (S/NF) There are opportunities in the area of security cooperation, too. For starters, we know that Tunisia could be doing a better job in the threat of terrorism in North Africa. This was all too clear when, yet again, the GOT failed recently to share information with us in a timely manner.
23. (C) On military cooperation, the time has come to shift our military assistance away from FMF to more targeted programs that meet specific needs of the Tunisian people.

Our Message: Deeper Cooperation Depends On Real Engagement

24. (S) Tunisia is not an ally today, but we still share important history and values. It is fair to consider Tunisia a friend, albeit a cautious one.
25. (S) To succeed, however, we need resources and commitment from Washington. New and expanded programs will require money and staff to implement them.
26. (S) Finally, we recommend US officials be clear in all meetings with Tunisians: more US cooperation depends on real Tunisian engagement. If the GOT is serious about reform, it must take the steps necessary to create a more open and democratic society.

Godec